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ABSTRACT

This is a literature review on the effect of the single-parent family on the academic achievement of children from such households. It is argued that, historically, society has discriminated against children from single-parent families, especially those of divorced parents. Research is cited which shows that: (1) children from one-parent households have lower levels of socio-emotional development and academic achievement; (2) students from two-parent families have higher reading comprehension than do students from one-parent families; (3) the academic achievement of black children in one-parent families is lower than that of white children from similar families; (4) boys are more affected by divorce and manifest more "acting out" behavior than girls; (5) low income, which is characteristic of one-parent families, is a factor in the probability of daughters dropping out of high school; (6) the female head of household is often less skilled and educated than the average man who acquires custody of his children; and (7) the father's role (or lack of it) makes a difference in children's behavior, especially boys. The need for further research on one-parent families is stressed. (AOS)

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"The Effect of the
Single-Parent Family
on Academic Achievement"

A Review of Related Literature
Submitted by:
Patrice Dawson

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"The Effect Of The Single-Parent Family On Academic Achievement"

By: Patrice Dawson

Review of Related Literature

In the United States, the increase of both divorces as well as illegitimate births has presently reached pandemic proportions. Also, only considering the unwed teen-aged mothers, the birth rate of their children has recently become astronomically high. Neither of the aforementioned categories is inclusive of those parents who have become single because of the death of their spouse. Nor does it include those adult women who have selected to become single mothers as a matter of either circumstance or preference. An examination of the above would indicate that in this society, the one-parent family is an increasing phenomenon.

Previously, children from the single-parent household, especially those of divorced parents, were the exception, and were consequently ostracized by the majority of members in society. In schools, those children were subjected to similar types of prejudices demonstrated toward others who were categorized as being a "minority". Studies of the past reveal the biases of educators toward children who were not products of the duo-family home. The damage experienced by some of those children was quite extensive.

Because of its current prevalence, the one-parent experience is receiving a significantly more amount of positive attention than it did in the past. The media has assumed a major role in assisting to increase sensitivity toward the remaining, fragmented family members. Also important, a wide variety of specialized services has emerged which specifically

address the unique concerns of those having that experience. Although much has been accomplished to change the attitudes of society as well as service needs of the single parent, it has become necessary that educators would be more cognizant of the impact of the single-parent home upon students. Thus, the increasing tendency toward the one-parent family has made studies such as this one of vital importance to educators.

There has been a significant amount of research conducted which concerns the socio-emotional growth and the academic achievement of the child from the single-parent family. A considerable amount of that research indicates that the child from the one-parent household has a lower level in both socio-emotional development as well as his academic achievement. Students from two-parent families tend to record higher reading comprehension achievement scores than do students from one-parent families, (Thompson, 1979). More specific results were reported by Shinn (1978), in an earlier study. He found differences in the cognitive performances between intact and one-parent families: ". . . from 0.2 to 1.6 years in achievement, from 0.2 to 0.9 standard deviation units in I.Q. and aptitude, and from 0.8 of the difference between "B" and "C" in grade point average" (Shinn, 1979, p. 5).

When black and white children are from the one-parent family, the academic achievement of the black children is lower. The difference in reading comprehension between two-parent and one-parent families was greater for black students than for white students (Thompson, 1979). Presently, approximately 50% of all black children reside in a one-parent family.

Studies indicate that boys have more "acting out" behavior than do girls from the one-parent situation. Boys are also more affected by divorce

than their female counterparts. Boys from mother headed families have been characterized as being more dependent, less masculine, more feminine in self-concepts and sex roles preferences, and as less aggressive than boys from intact families (Hetherington, 1978).

Considering the children from the specific types of single-family situations, there was a prevalent amount of literature which addressed the child from the divorced parent background. Although research indicates that the boys of the divorced have more discipline problems than the girls, it also shows more behavior problems exist for the child from the broken home than those from the two-parent household. Case histories and statistical studies both have pointed to the broken home as an important factor in personality maladjustment (Weeks, 1940). In subsequent studies, delinquents and criminals are highly probable as being products from the broken home.

The broken home is also noted for having more female children to drop out of school. A correlation between dropping out of high school, for the female, and living in a one-parent family exists (Doering, 1980). In another study conducted, low income was found as the most significant factor in the probability of a daughter dropping out of high school (Shaw, 1979). It has also been indicated that low income is a predominant characteristic of the one-parent family, especially true for the female head of household who is often less skilled and educated than the average man who acquires custody of his children.

The father's role, direct or indirect contact with the child is an important role. When he is absent, the mother may lack adequate financial and emotional support; however, both his availability to and involvement

with the children, especially the boys, appears to make a difference. As boys grow older, father availability becomes increasingly correlated with I.Q. scores (Hetherington, 1978). In another study, Blanchard and Biller, 1971, found that the academic performance of the high father-present group was superior compared to the boys who came from "situations with low father availability".

The impact of the divorce on the mother is a significant factor. Hetherington (1978) has found that a warm, well-functioning mother can counteract the effects of a poor father relationship. In a two-parent family, a good relationship with one parent can protect the child to an extent, from the damage done by a poor relationship with the other parent (Rutter, 1977). If the woman, who according to statistics, is the most likely candidate for parenthood, does not feel victimized, she would be more secure within herself. Thus, she would project those secure positive feelings to her children. As a result, the child would tend to feel less victimized, especially if the parents maintain a workable relationship. Also, when the person who has custody of the child is secure and stable, the child might be better off than if he were to remain in a home with two parents that is full of discord.

The age of the child at the time of the separation from his father has been found to be important in determining the possibility of future behavioral problems (Doering, 1980). No differences have been observed by Biller and Bahm (1970) if the separation occurred after the child's fifth birthday.

Among college students who were raised in a broken home, there is an interesting observation when they were compared to those of the duo-parent family in regard to academic performance. No significant differences were

found in any aspect of SAT performance (Black, 1981).

A study of 200 fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade children from low income families found that the broken home factor was not related to their lower scores on the achievement test (Deutsh, 1960).

It was also found that low income, instead of the broken home, was the major factor that may contribute to the possibility of girls dropping out of high school (Shaw, 1979). The social stigma against children from one-parent families can also be imposed by neighbors, schools and other organizations (Brown, 1980).

Many studies have been conducted which concern the child from the one-parent family and his academic achievement. One of the most significant studies occurred in 1979. At that time, NAESP and Kittering Foundations Institute for the Development of Educational Activities conducted a study to compare the academic achievement and social levels of children from the two-parent family. The population sample included a consortium of 26 elementary and secondary schools in 14 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, Washington, and Wisconsin. In addition to the sampling of the major regions of the country, the schools represent a cross-section of the inner city, suburb, small town, and rural areas. The schools chosen are representative samplings of the typical American schools, nationwide. The length of the study was two years, 1979 through 1980. All schools were surveyed twice so that a comparative analysis of the data could be achieved. The data was based upon reports from 15 schools with a total population of 8,556 students.

The findings of this study show students from the one-parent home to have a higher incidence of tardiness, discipline problems, suspensions, truancy, and school mobility at both the elementary and high school levels than do their peers from the two-parent home. The conclusion of this study acknowledges that children from the one-parent family show lower achievement and present more discipline problems than do the children from the duo-parent home (Brown, 1980). This study involved a large sampling of students from various parts of the country at different educational levels. Of the studies cited, this was the most comprehensive.

Another study of the comparative analysis of the reading comprehension achievement and various family demographic variables was conducted in Michigan. The population for this study included 1,400 fifth-grade students. Within this population, the students in twelve of the schools were considered a "manageable size". Of those, six of the schools had the highest number of minority as well as low income students; the other six schools represented the "average" schools. The California Achievement Test was administered to the fifth-graders in the fall of the school year. The reading comprehension subtest was utilized for the data necessary for this study. The findings were that students from the two-parent families scored higher in reading comprehension scores. In spite of that, the authors of the study urge that caution be used when generalizing the results because they felt that too little was known regarding the effects of other family organization variables.

In another study, the psychosocial adjustment and social behavior of children from divorced or separated single-parent families was compared to that of children from two-parent families (Ellison, 1979). The total number

of children involved in the study was 38, with 10 boys and 9 girls in each group. The single-parent group was headed by mothers, and the mean number of months since parental separation was 36. This study was based on the observation of children in Dyadic conversations. The findings show significant differences between the two groups of children in both their classroom behavior and their psychosocial adjustment. Children from the one-parent family were rated as being more "academically disabled" than those children from the duo-parent family. Also, the results of the analysis of gaze direction behavior suggest that two-parent children may adapt more successfully to the shifting demands of the classroom than the single-parent children (Ellison, 1979). The conclusion shows the need for further research.

Some relatively current, small yet significant studies have contradicted the aforementioned findings. First, when a sample of mothers and daughters from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience was examined to determine whether living in the one-parent family has any effect on the daughter's chances of completing high school, some interesting results were reported. The duration of that study was one year; the sample screening occurred in 1968 and lasted throughout 1969. The ages of the children involved in the study range from 14 through 18. The findings show that low income is the single most significant factor, as reported earlier, in accounting for the probability of a daughter dropping out of high school, both for whites and blacks (Shaw, 1979).

Secondly, when SAT scores were gathered from 55 females and 45 males from divorced families and matched with control group subjects from intact families, no significant differences were found in any aspect of SAT performance (Black, 1981). Another study of 200 fourth, fifth, and sixth-

grade students from low income families found that the broken home factor was not related to their lower scores on the achievement test (Deutsh, 1960). It is necessary to note that the more comprehensive studies were found on the opposite side. Also, the quantity of the studies for both sides as well was limited.

In conclusion, much research indicates that the single-parent family has an adverse effect on academic achievement. Also, students from the one-parent family tend to have more emotional problems. Children of divorced parents tend to "act out" more in school.

When blacks and whites from the one-parent family were compared, it was noted that black students were more academically deficient than white students in identical family background situations. This is interesting, in that about 50% of all black children are products of the single-parent family.

Boys are more affected by divorce than girls are. The boys from the one-parent household have been characterized as being more feminine and less aggressive. As boys grow older, father availability becomes increasingly correlated with I.Q. scores.

The age of the child at the time of the separation from his father is significant in determining the possibility of future behavioral problems.

Regardless of the above findings, it is apparent that there is a need for further, more extensive research in these areas. From those studies cited, there appears to be much inconsistent information. Also, much of the information listed does not include random samplings, did not occur over an extensive period of time, and completely lacked follow-up work. There are some strong indications that other variables such as income, family

prestige, and educational background of the family are also significant in determining a student's academic achievement.

There is a need for more current research. Many of the studies cited are old, and occurred before society's attitude toward the child from the single-parent family changed. Because the amount of research and its currentness was limited, there is much repetition of the same works.

As indicated, the review of literature shows that the one-parent family has an adverse effect on the academic achievement of children. These children also have more emotional and behavioral problems in school than children from two-parent families. Because of the magnitude of the occurrence of single-parenthood in the United States today, it is necessary, in the opinion of the writer, that further study in this area be conducted. The data from such studies should give some insight into an area which is of vital importance to educators today.

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